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the voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians

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Faith and  
creativity

# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest  
Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring  
religion through the worship of  
God and the celebration of life; the  
service of humanity and respect for  
all creation; and the upholding of the  
liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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*Photograph taken at Chatsworth House by Diane Bennett on the theme of 'Opening' for the Photography as a Spiritual Practice on Facebook.*

## Editor's view

## Connecting with our creativity

This week's very special wraparound cover is a gift, an invitation to contemplation. Kate Taylor, who wrote the cover story, secured the rights for us to use this wonderful painting. When I get a hold of my paper copy of *The Inquirer*, I plan to sit down for a few moments, read what Kate has written about the painting, then open it out full and enjoy the splendour of William Holman Hunt's vision.

Kate has for several years been using art, and teaching about its use in Unitarian services, standing at the intersection of creativity and spirituality. It is a marvellous place from which to connect with the divine and with our own spirits.

But it is not just in admiring the works of others that we can find inspiration. The Rev Gillian Peel has found a spiritual discipline and creative fulfilment in her practice of doodling. And, more than 50 participants have joined a Facebook group doing photography as a spiritual practice. (See those stories on pages 4 and 5.)

The theme fits well with John C Hall's article on the extraordinary effect the painting of the 'Diet of Torda' had on him while visiting Transylvania. If beauty – like the Holman Hunt painting – and creativity foster deeper connections within us and among us, that has to be a good thing. That is what faith within community is all about, really – connection.

– MC Burns

## Faith in Words

The annual summer issue of worship material, stories and meditations is coming up. Please send in prayers, addresses, meditations, art work, photographs – anything which is an expression of your faith – to *The Inquirer*.

For more information or to submit material, email: [Inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:Inquirer@btinternet.com) Or, use the editor's postal address at left.

**Material is due by 22 July**

*Apologies for the short notice. If you don't have something to send in now, contributions are, of course, welcome anytime.*

# Exploring the human condition with art

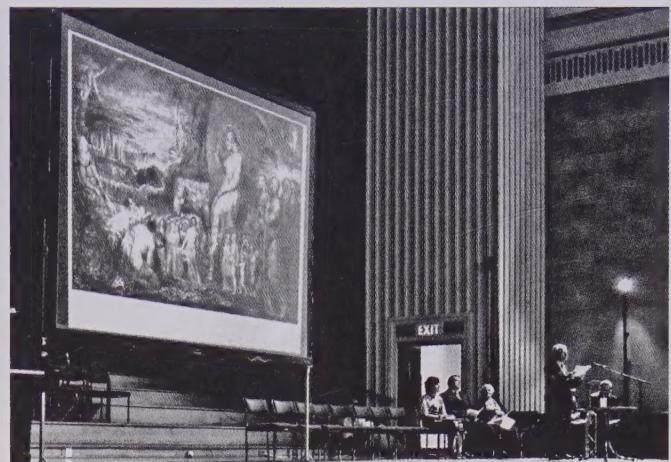
By Kate Taylor

We have much music and a wealth of words in our services but so little art. Yet contemplating paintings can be a rewarding spiritual exercise. The American painter John D Benson, who regards his skill as a God-given gift, speaks of art as illuminating life and reaching deep into the soul of humanity. It can be both appropriate and immensely stimulating to explore works of art during an act of worship.

A few weeks ago I led a service on 'Loving our Teenagers'. I had intended it simply to mark the 50th anniversary of the Whitsuntide clashes between Mods and Rockers in Brighton in May 1964. But it led me to think about the parents of these surprisingly wealthy young people and how they might feel about the strange cultures they were adopting. Coping with our teenagers can be challenging: they are anxious to break away, to create their own world, yet they are so inexperienced and vulnerable. The parents whom they are driving mad must try to offer unconditional love. I thought of Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son (c 1667): the father leans over the kneeling boy, his expression one of solemn tenderness, his arms folding his son in a warm embrace. The brother, too young and childless to understand this unconditional love, stands well to one side, his arms folded across his own chest.

The imperative of loving a wayward boy who is moving to a sphere beyond his parents' experience is portrayed in William Holman Hunt's the Finding of the Saviour in the Temple (painted over a period in the 1850s). Jesus was, we are told (Luke 2:41-52) only 12 but the narrative records all the cockiness and carelessness of an adolescent. Mary and Joseph's searching for the lad over a period of three days reflects their lack of any idea of what was compelling him. He rather rudely points that out to them.

Hunt travelled to the Middle East to find models for the group of rabbis in his painting. He shows their very varied reactions to a precocious child – they are surprised, fascinated, angered, or dismissive. But my interest here lies in the boy and the parents. He is marked out from all other figures by his size, the colour of his tunic, and his lack of headwear. He is, in any case, the central figure. He is turning away from Mary and Joseph, perhaps trying to pull away from his mother's embrace. Is there an element of disdain? But Hunt portrays



*At the 2011 Unitarian General Assembly meetings, Kate Taylor organised the use of paintings projected on a screen as a focal point for meditation on the service's theme of Palm Sunday. Photo by John Hewerdine*

their care for him in the gentle curve of Mary's body as she leans over him and the inclination of Joseph's head, his hand on Mary's shoulder. Others may read the picture differently, focusing for example on the symbolism of the scene outside the temple. But that is one of the joys of exploring art.

How to provide a copy of the picture for use during a service. There is a copy in the Wikipedia article about it which, the site claims, is 'in the public domain'. I have to admit that I copied and pasted it from there and then incorporated it in a Powerpoint presentation. For the image we use here, however, we have agreed a copyright fee with Birmingham Art Gallery. You may find copies of the paintings you need offered free of charge from the gallery or museum which holds them; you will be enabled to download quality images as jpgs – always provided you acknowledge the copyright. Images can then be pasted into a service sheet.

Where there is no rubric to dissuade you, those who are reasonable photographers can create their own images of sculptures. Last year a version of Robert Juliana's magnificent Love was to be found in London at the junction of Bishopsgate and Wormwood Street at the site of the 1993 IRA bomb. Currently there is a life-size tree made of pieces of cast iron outside the refurbished chapel at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. It has 27 elements, cast from trunks and branches of dead trees. The parts are held together with nuts and bolts. It is by the dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. It is rusting, as its creator expected, and is now a lovely golden brown. It stands against a background of living, very green trees. A period of meditation might invite reflection on the cycle of life, with change and decay and rebirth in a new form. The artist regards it as emphasising the individual as a part of the whole. One might consider the rather hard but firm means of bringing each branch/person into a meaningful community.

Exploring art enables us to reflect on the human condition, its daunting complexity, its strengths, weaknesses, beauty and awfulness. Looking at art can surely be an act of love. We should not be afraid of taking our congregation outside its comfort zone. Abstract art, for example, may be challenging but it invites an exploration of concepts, values, and moods that can enhance our spirituality.

*Kate Taylor is a member of the Wakefield congregation.*



*Ai Weiwei's Iron Tree, 2013, a six-metre-high sculpture at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photo by Kate Taylor*

# Doodling spurs creativity and spirit

By Gillian Peel

Can you remember the time when you filled bits of paper, margins and covers of schoolbooks with scribbles and patterns, maybe you still 'doodle' as you chat to a friend on the phone or, dare I say, as you sit and try and take notes in a talk or lecture? Well today 'doodling' is becoming ever more popular and for some it is even considered an art form. Sometimes known as Zentangle® or Zendoodle you can see evidence of these fun designs all over the place. In some Zentangle books it says:

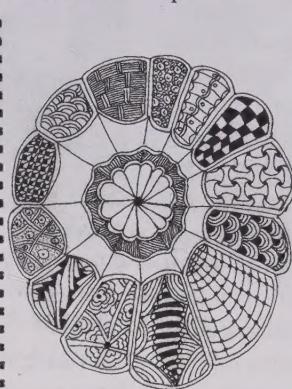
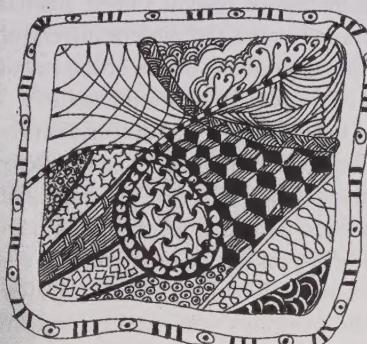
'Zentangle was developed by Rick Roberts and Maria Thomas. The ritual helps anyone get in touch with life, solve problems, turn mistakes into positives, be innovative and become more creative.'

Well, for me the discovery was a wonderful liberation both artistically and spiritually. When I first discovered the Zentangle patterns and began doodling seriously I was very tentative about my

artistic and creative

ability but as I became engrossed in producing designs I discovered that I was becoming more accomplished in my other creative endeavours of quilting and painting.

I think it was the process that was



responsible for this creative burst but there was something else too, the process was becoming more and more of a spiritual practice for me. 'How can doodling be spiritual?' I can almost hear people asking the question. I remember my friend

and colleague Danny Crosby saying once that if you stick 'Zen' in front of anything it can be claimed as spiritual. Well I don't know about that, but certainly when I practice my doodling I find that a change overcomes my being. I become more relaxed, my mind slows down and approaches a meditative state, my breathing becomes even and any stress seems to slip away.

I have led a few workshops on doodling in this way and have found that almost everyone has been able to get something positive out of the process, elderly or young, artistic or completely insecure in being creative. Everyone seems to be able to produce something that looks great and best of all they feel positive about.

For me though this is nothing to do with words, it is all to do with experience – the experience of creating mindfully with one line at a time.

*The Rev Gillian Peel is a retired Unitarian minister. The illustrations are her doodles. Learn more about Zentangle at [www.zentangle.com](http://www.zentangle.com)*

## Nurturing spirit with craft and creativity

By Kate Taylor

It was a privilege to join an informal gathering of seven Unitarians and a Quaker one morning in May at a large Edwardian villa in Giggleswick.

The group had hired the house, on a self-catering basis, for a week, for workshops, first on American quilting, then on creative writing. Both were led by the inspirational American Unitarian artist, minister and author, the Rev Dr Judith Campbell from Martha's Vineyard.

I joined them for a creative-writing morning. We sat, or sprawled, on comfortable sofas and basket chairs in what had been the drawing room, with an ironing board in one bay window and a sewing machine in the other, both windows looking out on the fells. And, guided by Judith, we wrote.

I hesitate to say how amazing the morning was in case every reader of *The Inquirer* wants to take part in next year's event!

Judith first announced, 'Boot'. People wrote for 15 minutes or so and then read what they had written to the rest of us. I was quite stunned at what the word had prompted. How strikingly phrased the pieces were! Then it was 'Bolt'. Another 15 minutes writing. More reading aloud. More perceptive, impressive, work drawing on the contrasting meanings of the

word. We were warming up. Judith then read some advice on evoking the senses, from *The Right to Write* (1998) by American writer, Julia Cameron. Now we were to have a more specific and demanding task – a conversation between two people in a Cathedral. We had to provide sights, smells, sounds, perhaps something to feel or taste. But we had longer to write. The results included skilfully drawn characters, convincing dialogue, evocative descriptions, embryonic stories.

I was impressed by how well Unitarians know our cathedrals! Later we were asked to write about the same two characters but now in a hospital. The tasks were treated with respect, the readings heard almost with reverence.

Judith, who describes herself as a liberal religious mystic, regards painting and writing (she does both) as having a spiritual dimension. She has always written; her first published piece appearing in *Yankee Magazine* back in 1970. In the 1980s, when she was a Professor of Art, she wrote two books on painting in watercolour. In the 1980s she began writing a detective mystery but, she says, 'Life took over'. She returned to novel writing only a few years ago but has rapidly become a prolific and popular author of the Olympia Brown series of detective novels. The most recent, *An Improper English*

(Continued on next page)

# Photography as a spiritual practice

By Daniel Costley

Earlier this year, a new tumblr blog appeared ([www.practicinggent.tumblr.com](http://www.practicinggent.tumblr.com)) providing 'a space for Unitarian Universalists to explore a shared spiritual practice during Lent in images and reflection'. The brain-child of Mr Barb Greve, the site provided a one-word theme for each of the 47 days of Lent, encouraging all to submit a single photograph inspired by that word. The topics ranged from 'struggle' to 'joy', from 'humility' to 'rejoice'. The number of responses submitted each day varied, from a handful to 20 or so, but the real interest for me was two-fold. Firstly, how did I, through reflection, respond to the theme and thus, how would I select and frame a photograph for the day? Secondly, how similar or different were other contributor's pictures? And how did I respond to those?

Somehow, I managed to take and submit a photograph for each of the 47 days, and found the practice of immense value. It provided an opportunity for deliberate reflection, as well as inspiration for creative photography. By forcing myself to maintain the practice, each and every day, the very act of reflection and photography became a Spiritual Practice in itself. As with all such practices, it began fairly easily – the first 10 days flew by – but there came a time around the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> weeks where the discipline of the practice became harder to maintain. Yet I struggled through, and I was so glad I did. I was rewarded with a deepening personal spiritual response to the task each day, and found the period of single-word reflection to be of great value in bringing a new approach to stillness and spiritual development.

Once Easter arrived I was initially pleased to be 'let-off' the daily routine. However I became aware quite quickly that I



Daniel Costley's photograph submitted for the theme of 'Home'.

missed the stillness, challenge and creative push that the single-word reflection provided. So I began again, giving myself a word each day and continuing the practice.

This worked fine, but as is often the case with creative practices, the spark that other people can provide was missing. I could no longer see the ideas of others, and I no longer had the opportunity to add other dimensions to my own reflection.

And so began the Facebook group, 'Photography as a Spiritual Practice'. With an acknowledgement to the inspiration of the 2014 Lenten

Practice, the group brings together all those interested in the notion of photography as a spiritual practice. Anyone, and everyone, whether they want to contribute, or just browse, is welcome. Whilst there is a nod to its Unitarian root, the page is open to people of all faiths. Most of the current members (53 at time of writing) are from a Unitarian background, and most are from the UK.

This group is provided with a theme that lasts for seven days, set up as a single photographic album. Members are encouraged to provide a photo a day, or one a week, or somewhere in-between. People are also given the chance to add some words. There are always new and interesting reflections and creations appearing daily. Recent themes have included 'Beginnings', 'Lost' and 'Service'. The variations in reflection and meaning have been eye-opening.

All are welcome to join the Group – all you need is a Facebook account. In dreadful computer address terms, the site is at: <http://on.fb.me/1k1zCx> Or, go to [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) and search for 'Photography as a Spiritual Practice'.

*The Rev Daniel Costley is Minister to Sevenoaks Unitarians.*

## Words came, confidence grew, community created

(Continued from previous page)

*Mission*, is set in a retreat house!

This is the seventh year that Judith has come from America to lead these workshops. They began after she had come over with her English husband to see his family. She stayed with friends from the Unitarian congregation at Newcastle-under-Lyme. There she provided a day's writing workshop and there she met Louise Rogers. From that the idea of the residential creative-writing course developed. The plan was to use craft and creative writing as a means of exploring individuals' spiritual selves. The first event, in 2008, took place at the Nightingale Centre. An item in *The Inquirer* drew the participants. The centre was shared with other visitors. Seeking something that might be more of a retreat, Louise found a house near Hebden Bridge. Three years ago she discovered Woodlands House, a place that is both roomy



(l-r) Annette Percy, Louise Rogers, Julie Dadson, The Rev Gillian Peel, Stephen Palmer, Chris Stokes, Jenny Young and The Rev Dr Judith Campbell

(it can sleep 19) and yet intimate in scale. It is set in wooded grounds at the end of a quiet road.

For this year's course, a stock of provisions was ordered in advance and other items, I suspect, were brought from individual homes. Members of the group seemed happy to lay the long dining table, prepare the meals and do the washing up. The sewing machines and ironing board also came with the members.

But what do they gain? Talents are fostered. Confidence is built.

There is nothing better than the combination of freedom, structure and pressure to lead to the development of one's unique writing voice. One of the regular members, Stephen Palmer, saw his first novel, *Scar Tissue*, published last year.

Tempted? Contact Louise Rogers to inquire about plans for next year: [Louise.rogers256@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:Louise.rogers256@tiscali.co.uk)

*Kate Taylor is a member of the Wakefield congregation.*

# Our pilgrimage, a trip back in time

By Lesley Harris

Earlier this summer, a group of Cotswold Unitarians visited some Transylvanian Unitarians, both in their headquarters in Kolozsvár and in their small towns and villages in the remote Homorod Valley.

At first sight, Kolozsvár, (Cluj Napoca in Romanian), the 'capital city' of the Transylvanian Hungarian Unitarians, appeared to be a modern, bustling city with an Orange mobile phone shop on almost every corner – a smaller, quainter and Austro-Hungarianised version of our Unitarian capitals of London and Manchester. But to go inside some of the buildings was to go back through time.

For example, the Unitarian School was an Austro-Hungarian version of the substantial Victoria edifices I remember from childhood, with high, dark corridors, large classrooms with huge high windows, solid furniture, and attentive happy children in uniform. Their end-of-term graduation songs, their end of term exhibition and a school bell which played Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Adjacent to the school was the Unitarian Headquarters and the Protestant Theological Institute where there were more corridors, steps and ledges at every corner, large shaded rooms, large plants, heavy dark wooden tables and chairs, framed by rows of dark pictures of historical Unitarians.

In these large, shaded rooms, we were privileged to hear traditional, solid and reliable overviews by traditional Unitarian professors who had a traditional, solid and reliable basis to their faith. And what could be more historic than the highlight of seeing a beautifully preserved, genuine, original 1579 letter written by Unitarian reformer Francis David who gave his work and life for the religious tolerance that some of us enjoy today. What could be more soaring than the large, white, simply decorated and delicately carved Kolozsvár Unitarian headquarters church? What could be more hospitable than the lovely lunch, chat and local brandy provided by our hosts to round off the headquarters part of our Transylvanian Unitarian pilgrimage?

Moving outwards from the Unitarian city headquarters we began our journey to Unitarian outposts in the Transylvanian countryside. Only a short distance from Kolozsvár we arrived at the historic little town of Torda where we saw the very church where Transylvanian Unitarian pioneer Francis David preached the famous Diet of Torda: namely the right for all religious movements to worship as they saw fit. I leave it to John Hall however to describe the famous painting in the local museum of Francis David proclaiming this message. (*See story, right*)

After several hours drive we arrived in Udvarhely where we stayed at the comfortable Hotel Tarnava and visited the town Unitarian church. From Udvarhely we had day trips in which we climbed up winding roads to the hills and vales of the remote Homorod area, back to a time of un-mechanised countryside, no fences, no hedges, just large rolling forests and wild-flowered grassy plains, punctuated by lakes. In the village of Szentpal (St Paul) where our host Csaba Todor ministers, apart from the electricity pylons, you could have been back 200 or 300 years. There was hardly a car to be seen but there were horses and carts on the roads and storks' nests on top of almost every pylon pole.

The spiritual culmination of our pilgrimage was our service at the Szentpal Unitarian Church, a simple white building with a tall spire, set in an open grassy, slightly cultivated area surrounded by trees. The pews and other woodwork inside were a beautiful



Cotswold Unitarians in the Unitarian Church at Udvarhely with the Revs Csaba Todor and Mozes Kedei. Photo by Don Phillips

clear blue. The organ was to the left high on a second level at the back. All very different from our urban little brick- and stone-clad chapel in Evesham.

And yet, in some ways, the Szentpal church resembled what our little chapel in Evesham must have been like when it was originally built in 1737. Inside the Szentpal church, its current pulpit, like our chapel's first pulpit, was in the middle, with the pews on three sides. Like the first windows of our chapel, the Szentpal church windows were clear glass. As must have formerly been the case in our own chapel, both inside and out, I could hear the songs of the birds and the sounds of the countryside more clearly than I have ever heard them before as there was no background traffic noise.

Our Szentpal Sunday service, in a mixture of English and Hungarian, given by Csaba, along with the Revs Don and Linda Phillips, and accompanied by the beautiful church choir singing in both Hungarian and English, was simple, moving, traditional and timeless. It was St Paul's address to the Corinthians about all the different gifts of the Spirit have been given to different people, and how all the parts of the body are equally useful, and how everyone has a part to play. It is a sermon that can be given across time, across denominations, throughout the world, and it went down very well with both our Transylvanian village hosts and our visiting town-dwelling party.

After the service, came the festivities throughout the afternoon and evening, down in the "English room" of Csaba's house. Such wonderful hospitality! Our glasses constantly replenished with local wine and local "fire-water" (village produced clear brandy). Seemingly limitless supplies of home made food! Much impromptu singing, both in Hungarian and English, accompanied instrumentally by Csaba, his wife Eva and their daughter Eszter. Plus a separate visit to a wine, fire-water and cheese tasting party in another village just down the road with tales of farmers' battles with bears and wolves from the forests.

In all: a pilgrimage to Unitarian history as well as to another Unitarian community, a reminder that a traditional, strong, God centred faith lives on and yet also an illustration of Francis David's motto that we do not have to think alike to love alike.

Lesley Harris is a member of Evesham Unitarians

# Painting continues to inspire awe

By John C Hall

Together with eight others, fellow Unitarians from the Evesham and Cheltenham-Gloucester congregations, I feel tremendously glad to have had the opportunity to stand before a magnificent oil painting by the eminent Hungarian artist Korosfoi-Kriesch Aladar. It is an astonishing masterpiece, actually dated 1896 but possessing an overall appearance and quality that calls to mind the great Rembrandt no less. Especially, I felt moved by the depth of feeling in this painting.

Several weeks after experiencing such an extraordinary picture, I continue to 'see' it with a vividness that is a sure test of a painting's power combined with unique artistic authority. The Diet of Torda: thus Korosfoi-Kriesch's beautiful achievement is titled.

It was 1568 when King Janos Zsigmond Zapolya of Hungary, encouraged by his Unitarian minister Ferenc (Francis) David, issued an exceptional edict which was in essence a declaration of religious tolerance. And in the painting, the Diet of Torda, the artist has imagined – with theatrical brilliance – that moment when Ferenc David delivered, in church, the proclamation concerning legality being granted to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians throughout Transylvania.

That previously Unitarian, but now Roman Catholic Church in the town of Torda, was a place of pilgrimage for our group led by Don and Linda Phillips. And then came the wonderful time we spent in front of Korosfoi-Kriesch's masterful painting.

Should you visit Transylvania, I do recommend that you go into the recently opened small museum at Torda to see the Diet of Torda picture. One enters a darkened room, wherein a great canvas is suspended centrally. The museum attendant will then switch on lighting which marvellously illuminates the painting, so that it commands the attention profoundly in an otherwise obscured place. For me, here was a singular work of art that hugely surprised; indeed it far surpassed any expectation, and it is my view that had it been painted by, say, Rembrandt or Caravaggio around 400 years ago then surely this would have been one of the world's most treasured masterworks? By the way, I feel it is nec-



*Ferenc (Francis) David speaks out for religious liberty in this, an admittedly inferior, copy of 'The Diet of Torda' by the Hungarian artist Korosfoi-Kriesch. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.*

essary to say here that no reproduction can do the painting justice. The artist has achieved such a lambent quality to the lighting for his momentous subject, and then the sensitivity in his painting of individual personages provides another visual treat. One gazes at a vast canvas so unified by radiant golds and a counterpart of warm deep browns towards black, while the eye also registers to the picture's left side a single figure richly clad in reddishness.

This is the king, who had declared himself to be Unitarian. Apparently he is the only Unitarian monarch in history.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that the Edict of Torda, also known as the Patent of Toleration, was not the first attempt to legislate religious freedoms in Hungary. In fact, the edict was only one of a series which various religious groups seized the opportunity to secure legal tolerance for their own adherents. That particular edict of 1568 did not legally apply to Eastern Orthodox Romanians, or to Jews, or to Muslims, who were to be "tolerated." Moreover, the edict speaks of preachers and congregations, not of individuals. It does not guarantee the free exercise of *personal* religious conscience.\* In 1993 Unitarians in Transylvania met at Torda to celebrate the anniversary of the original 1568 edict. They issued a new statement of religious tolerance, which said in part: "In this solemn moment of remembrance we reaffirm that faith is the gift of God; we promote religious freedom and strive for the respect and implementation of basic human rights..."

The original Edict of Torda was, sadly, revoked by subsequent edicts; and Ferenc David was convicted of heresy, dying in prison, when the Roman Catholic Church took ascendancy. So doesn't this make it all the more a reason to celebrate that extremely fine painting in the museum at Torda, whilst regretting that the picture and its historical background is not a great deal better known throughout the world?

*John C Hall is a member at Evesham.*

*\* See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict\\_of\\_Torda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Torda)*

*'This Diet reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. ...Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearings is by the word of God.' Excerpt, Diet of Torda*

# Pews: a particular type of property

A delightful story, given to me by a colleague, tells of a Quaker meeting house that went into decline during WW2. The whole town was struggling and the congregation dwindled until there was just one person left. She was of the old-school, still spoke in 'thees' and 'thous', and was determined that her beloved meeting house was not going to shut. She hung on, took care of the place and every Sunday opened the doors at 10am, all alone. Weeks, months passed, until her prayers were answered. A man came in and sat down for worship. She walked over to him, fixed him with her stern, blue Quaker eyes and said, "Friend, thou occupiest *my* seat!"

\*\*\*

This inspired a sermon which I called 'How to Sit in Church.' There is quite a skill to it, and several problems. Someone else's pew? Sit at the back for easy escape? Down at the front to be sure I can be seen, hear and participate? Next to someone I know? Well away from someone I dislike? The end of a pew, to make it difficult for others to pass me? Many questions. I even found biblical references. (*Mark 12: 39-41 et al*). So I was pleased to discover that The Chapels Society, which 'seeks to foster public interest in the architectural and historical importance of all places of worship that might loosely be described as Nonconformist' ([www.chapelsociety.org.uk](http://www.chapelsociety.org.uk)) convened a conference on the subject in 2012, and published papers from it as the first issue of its *Journal*. Fully illustrated, it discusses seating of various kinds and the problems arising from arguments about forms, benches, pews or chairs, and how they should be arranged. Mention is made of a number of Unitarian chapels ('church' is avoided, to stress non-conformity). Our renowned Octagon chapel, Norwich gets a good mention with the pros and cons of its shape, as well as some square meeting houses and rectangular ones with pulpit on the long wall. Should seats face the pulpit, stressing 'the Word' as against the sacraments?

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Some issues surprised me. I was aware of the old system of pew rents, having seen wall charts with named pews, and numbers on pew ends. I know of a church in 19<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts where pew rents were auctioned to the highest bidder, and I once met a woman who inherited a pew rent in an aunt's will. Our Altrincham chapel originally had "strangers' pews" at the back, for visitors. Rented pews were often occupied, by those who could afford them, at morning services, but all seats became freely available in the evening when the less affluent could attend, thereby avoiding uncomfortable mixing of the social classes. Later, pew rents were abandoned, 'all seats are free' and 'here, let no one be a stranger' notices indicated more democratic attitudes.

Even more surprising was the question of whether men and women should sit separately, as they do today in orthodox synagogues, mosques and the Unitarian village congregations in Transylvania. It is probable that segregation of the sexes prevailed in parish churches until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the fact that many of our best-loved meeting houses have two doors, suggests it prevailed there too. When did integration occur? It was probably one of those social changes that occurred gradually and without much discussion.

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## Funny Old World

By  
John Midgley



Other questions have been about whether seats should have backs, or arms, or be upholstered. Our puritan forbears struggled with this, unsure if places of worship were meant for us to be at ease, and comfortable. With time it became a matter of pride for seats and all fittings to be finely made, crafted, quality furniture.

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Though democracy dictated that all seats should be on the same level, that the congregation should all face the pulpit and no-one end up behind the preacher, there was doubt about people facing each other. In earlier days the intention was not that people come to see each other, but to be in the presence of God. In time, however, the notion of community togetherness gained supremacy, with the intention that congregants were to be active participants, not a passive audience. The big Methodist central halls, much discussed in the *Journal*, were built for the working masses, large in number, held together with rows of pews, rounded at the end of galleries. They brought the people together for community, emotional uplift in hymn-singing and powerful preaching.

Some had tip-up seats like theatres and at least one dimmed the lighting when the sermon began. One minister reported, "... this was a signal for hands to slip down the side of the seat, feeling for the hand of the girl sitting in the next seat! I think they thought I couldn't see them but I could... But I wasn't worried – I'd rather see them holding hands in church than cuddling in the back row of some town cinema!"

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At one time Coventry Unitarian church had tip-up seats. Any others? Should we reintroduce them? Might it make for a revival? In June, Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian* got me all of a flutter with an enthralling theory that we are entering the post-digital age. Soon, all this talk of apps, streams, firewalls, will be old hat. Live events are in. Glastonbury could sell double its £210 tickets. Concerts, West End theatre, museums, heritage sites, tourist venues, are booming. Arts festivals, courses and debates flourish; poets and writers are becoming performers. Booming too are conferences, seminars, master-classes, retreats and book clubs ... "Here it comes!" I thought. "He's going to add, 'and church-going'." He didn't, though he came mighty close. He spoke of the growing need for human togetherness, for being with real people. "The post-digital means human congregation, and thank goodness for that," he concluded. Was he unconsciously thinking of church-going? Shall we soon see youngsters tweeting, 'See you in church?'

I hope so, as long as it is not in my seat!

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*

# Circles on my mind

**From Nothing to Everything**  
by  
Danny Crosby



I have had circles on my mind in recent weeks. I am not entirely sure why, but they keep on appearing and re-appearing in the eye of my mind. I know that this probably sounds a little strange but I have noticed that circles and spheres have been cropping up in conversations everywhere.

I have heard talk of circles in the physical circles I move in, as well as the social media ones too. I have lost count of the number of times, in recent weeks, I have heard the phrase "circles of friends" and how society is made up of many over-lapping circles. I wonder how many times such phrases have been uttered by my own lips. I heard it several times as I chatted with friends over coffee the other morning and within the interfaith friendship circle I am part of during a recent discussion. Now is this because these things are on my mind that I have been hearing them, or is it because I keep hearing of circles and that this is why they are on my mind? Well who knows? Certainly not I. I wonder if our human lives are made up of circles; I wonder if all life is made up of circles. Circles that are ever widening or ever decreasing.

The great 19th-century Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson held this view, he often spoke of circles. His essay titled *Circles* opened with the following words:

'The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. ... every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.'

Emerson was suggesting that all life is a series of ever-expanding circles; circles ever reaching out and encompassing more and more, as more is revealed. I think I agree with Ralph Waldo, certainly when I look at my life it is built on many circles that are forever stretching out.

Now I am sure that there are many who will say that there must be a limit to these circles and that life on this sphere, the earth is one of them. Well while that was once the case it is no longer true, we can after all blast off into space and so the circles of physical limit seem to be ever expanding too. As they say the universe is ever expanding.

Now when Emerson spoke of these ever-increasing circles he was not talking of merely physical ones, he saw this same limitlessness with regard to truth and understanding too. He saw God similarly also. He saw the Divine as being beyond the circumference of these ever-expanding circles, but he also saw God at the core, the centre of the circle.

This kind of Panentheism is something I have a great deal of sympathy with. It makes sense to me, the idea that God somehow circles all life; the view that God is somehow more than all that is and yet is also at the core of life and truth; God is greater than all and yet at the core of everything.

So yes it seems that life is made up of circles and perhaps it has always been thus.

Now circles can both exclude and include. In the poem *Outwitted* Edwin Markham wrote

*He drew a circle that shut me out –*

*Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.*

*But Love and I had the wit to win:*

*We drew a circle that took him in!*

Now to me there is something in these words that hints at what it is at the core of our Unitarian faith. We are an open tradition that is

ever expanding

beyond the confines of human created division, whether they be religious or secular. When I look at the world what I see are circles of exclusion and conflict being drawn up.

So what can we do about it? How do we draw circles that can take everyone in? Well I believe that is the challenge of our age and maybe this is the challenge of our tradition. I think it begins by understanding that at the core of everything is a love

that we can connect with. A love that is somehow greater than the circles we create. It begins by seeing that there are no limits to the circumferences of life and that no one can be excluded from the circle of love and life.

For love is eternal and love is perfect and love knows no limits.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.*

*Background illustration by Sanja Gjenero*

# Former GA president Eila Forrester

*Eila Forrester, former president of the Unitarian General Assembly, died on 26 April. She was 79. Her husband of 28 years, Albert, died in 2007. **Stephanie Ramage** gathered some remembrances of Eila, who was an active Unitarian all her life.*

Stephanie writes: I feel privileged to have been a member of the same congregation as Eila. One of her finest gifts to her congregation was leading Worship which she believed should be at the heart of a religious community. Her ability to extemporise in Worship was superb. She would stand and her gaze would fall on the clerestory windows opposite the pulpit. She would pause and out of the silence her words flowed beautifully, prayerfully and with great spiritual depth and meaning. The quiet attention of the congregation, as we listened to her words, was palpable. We knew that we were experiencing something exceptional.

Eila loved people. If a new person came into the congregation inevitably they were invited to her house for a meal or a cup of tea. (Incidentally, she and Albert were generous hosts and Eila a great cook.) During her time as Lay Leader there was always an item on the committee agenda called "People" in which time was set aside to reflect on the joys and sadness, triumphs and troubles of members of the community. This was an act of love which did not break confidences but placed people at the centre of concern. She made sure that everyone was valued (particularly the children) and their gifts and talents appreciated. This resulted in the creation of monthly "All Age Worship" led by Salli Ward, a Chapel member.

Eila was passionate about the Chapel building, she arranged a "chapel trip" to Romania, she staged a 'Son et Lumière' in which every member of the congregation took part – saying 'no' to Eila was never an option! I could go on and on but sadly, space will not allow so I will end with the words of Gwyneth Roberts, Eila's best friend: Eila's end of life journey was not an easy one. On my final visit to her she seemed already to have started on that journey's final stages.

And now, this singular Unitarian flame that gave out such a brave and steady light is finally extinguished. Her death will leave a gaping hole in the lives of many of us, her family in particular, that was so dear to her. Her death is a loss – not only to her chapel but to the wider Unitarian community for which she worked so ceaselessly throughout her life. But all that made Eila unique, all that we now remember with gratitude, lives on in our memories and in the salutary influence she had on all our lives – its glow will continue to warm our hearts and thoughts forever. Thank you, dear Eila, for sharing with us your love of life, the richness of your personality, your kindness and your generosity of spirit.

**Jeff Teagle – Unitarian General Assembly General Secretary, 1994-07** writes: I first got to know Eila during her Presidential period (1990-1991) and was pleasantly surprised that she found time to pay attention to the Development Commission and it was a joy to have her backing. I was appointed General Secretary in 1994 and conscious of much goodwill from Eila – her father, the Rev John Keilty had been a noteworthy holder of that post for 20 years. In the post, I worked on "The President's Commission Report on Training for Ministry" a detailed and profound document initiated by Eila. In many ways it was a document ahead of its time.

Twenty years later it is still referred to by those involved in the contemporary debate about ministry training. Eila



*Eila Forrester 1935-2014*

was a most important shaker and mover in our denomination. She did so in a most pleasant and natural manner, but was not afraid to put her head above the parapet in matters of serious import. I was very glad of her friendship and goodwill and always remember her bright enthusiasm and depth of sincerity.

**Kay Millard – Hibbert Trust** writes: Eila was a member of the Hibbert Trust from 1975 to 2007, and for many of those years she served as Chair, steering the Trust with gentle firmness and good humour into the 21st century. She established the "Theme Committee", which pioneered new projects such as travel scholarships for Unitarian Ministry Students and revived the Hibbert Scholarship for Unitarians to study for PhDs. Overseeing the final closure of the last of the

"Hibbert Houses" (established with subscriptions from the whole Unitarian Community) Eila was pleased that the money from the sale went appropriately to the Nightingale Centre, where the Hibbert Room remains a lasting memorial.

Eila was a delight to work with. She knew, however, when the time had come for her to hand the Trust over to a new pilot. In that, as in everything else, Eila showed her care for the future of the Hibbert Trust.

**Gwyneth Roberts – a long standing friend** writes: It was a great delight to have known Eila – to appreciate her many, good qualities, her kindness as well as her considerable intelligence. She was imbued from an early age with Unitarian virtues – tolerance, freedom of thought, and she was always a seeker after truth. These were the values that shaped her and by which she truly lived her life. She coupled with them a generosity of spirit and compassion for others, particularly those whose path in life was strewn with obstacles; she was a supporter of good causes, thoughtful but never down-hearted, serious without being earnest. She had not only a genius for friendship but also a great appreciation of art, of music and of the natural world.

**Peter Sampson** writes: Although I knew Eileen Keilty Forrester all my life, my closest collaboration with her was in the 1970s, when she invited me to join the Unitarian General Assembly Worship Subcommittee.

We used to meet in Eila's flat in Islington – after gathering in Marsden's Wine Bar across the street – and continuing in animated conversation till 3 am, all of this recorded by Eila in her own inimitable (illegible?!) handwriting.

These discussions led to a veritable treasury of experiences which found rich expression in books of prayers, meditations and poems by contemporary Unitarians from 1979 onwards. As a group we set out to put worship at the centre of Unitarian thought and action. We organised weekend workshops with congregations up and down the country, usually culminating in a Sunday service conducted by the participants. We created the Quiet Room at the General Assembly Meetings where we also held early morning or lunchtime services, which challenged the conventional way of doing things.

I remember another event, the Anniversary Service in 1979, in Manchester, conducted by Eileen and Eric Wild when they shared the proceedings in a programme of short addresses, interspersed with prayers and music, concluding with a spirited rendering by all the assembly of 'Jerusalem'.

She was an inspiration to my generation and I shall always remember her.

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'And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.'

And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' (Luke 2:46-49 KJV)